

## Picard: We must keep the focus on why plurality is important



*Robert G. Picard is Director of Research at the **Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism**, University of Oxford, a research fellow at **Green Templeton College** (Oxford), and a Fellow of the **Royal Society of Arts**. Here he argues that digital intermediaries should not be ignored in the debates over media pluralism, particularly when they perform editorial functions. This post is part of **our series on the role of digital intermediaries in media plurality**.*

The **House of Lords inquiry** into media pluralism this past year and the Department for Culture Media and Sport's request that **Ofcom** consider how pluralism should be measured are healthy developments that bring significant attention to the challenges facing news and public affairs content. It comes simultaneously with the **EU's Media Pluralism Monitor** study of the UK that has identified some areas for concern that UK policymakers should consider.

### The scope of the plurality debate needs to be broadened to include intermediaries

In the coming debate it will be important for policymakers to think more widely about pluralism than merely focusing on ownership or control of the daily press and impartiality in broadcast news. Those two concepts have dominated discussion in the past, but the perspective needs to be broadened today.

We are all aware that the public is increasingly relying on digital platforms for news and public affairs information and that search firms, aggregators, and social media are progressively more important. These contributors to the news/information environment should not be ignored in future policy. Although they have not been well addressed in previous pluralism policies, and have not been subject to significant other regulation in the past, regulation of digital intermediaries is starting to become the **norm in nation states around the globe** and they are appropriate entities for public policy attention.

### Editorial controls come with responsibilities and scrutiny

One of the most important issues in media pluralism debates today is what digital platforms and players should be included. I believe the decisive issue in determining this is one of editorial control. This is important because mediated communications influence our understanding of the world about us and how we engage with it. Decisions on what to information to convey and how to convey it are at the heart of editorial judgment and those decisions influence the meaning of the information, ideas, opinions, and mediated experience provided. The meaning associated with these functions can never be fully impartial or objective, because media create and convey meaning within social settings and institutional arrangements that reflect dominant values and norms, ideologies, and the economic and structural power arrangements in society. The complex institutional structures of media themselves each have their own processes, values, norms and behaviours that influence the content. This reality is why plurality is important.

### Digital intermediaries perform editorial functions

We must be concerned by anyone or anything that exercises editorial judgment about the news and information the public receives. Editorial judgments are exercised when choices are made about the significance of information and the number of people it will affect or interest. Judgment is exercised in deciding what news/information about conflict, deviance, politics and government, celebrity, sports, and human interest are given prominence and in what quantity. In the **past** this was exercised by editors and producers of print and broadcast news and public **^**affairs

programmes, but it is now also exercised by search firms, aggregators, and online news sources of all kinds—either based on human agency or human-created algorithms that direct computers how to select among multiple items. Judgments are being made and we ignore these at peril.

## The problem of regulation

The default response by some observers will be that digital firms must be regulated. Regulation has its uses and the UK has relied heavily upon it in trying to keep UK plurality from worsening, but it has not proved effective in improving plurality. So its use in the digital environment must be carefully considered in light of whether it will actually produce desired outcomes.

Regulation may be necessary to require digital intermediaries to disclose the general effects of their algorithms for improved public understanding of what links are returned in search results or how news stories are selected for display by aggregators, but it cannot be expected to generally increase plurality itself. Past experience has shown that one must also be careful with plurality regulation to ensure it is not being primarily used as weapon for the benefit of competitors, many of which have no intention of changing their own behaviour to improve plurality.

These limits to regulatory effectiveness are why **Robin Foster** has argued that increased dialogue is needed with digital firms to gain outcomes that may not be achieved through regulation alone. Regulation is just one of the many policy initiatives available and should not necessarily be the measure of choice.

## Additional options

A variety of other policy opportunities exist including encouraging and incentivising behaviours of media and digital firms that improve rather than harm pluralism, promoting reflection and self-regulation, and even public investment in alternative intermediaries for the specific purpose of promoting pluralism. Some argue for limiting the size of large digital intermediaries—there is a proposal in the European Parliament asking that **Google be broken up** so its search and other activities are separated—but that alone will not increase pluralism in content to which such firms direct users. What is critical is that the ways intermediaries think about and make judgements about content, and how they display it, be improved to ensure the availability of pluralistic information to the widest number of users.

As we look forward to the coming debates on plurality, we must keep the focus on why plurality is important and who affects the news and views the public receives. Only then can one appropriately make policy choices and construct policies needed for the digital age.

*This article gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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